



Hal Herzog Ph.D.

Animals and Us

84% of Vegetarians and Vegans Return to Meat. Why?

Animal activists should emphasize reduction, not elimination, of eating meat.

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 Reviewed by Jessica Schrader



One of my daughters recently asked me for suggestions on types of meat she might enjoy. I was shocked. A vegetarian for nearly 18 years, she has always found meat, well, icky. In retrospect, I should not have been surprised about her new interest in carnivory. After all, as a researcher, I have studied vegetarians who return to meat. But I never figured she would join the ranks of ex-vegetarians, so I asked her to jot down a few words about why she originally gave up the consumption of flesh and why she now feels compelled to change her veggie ways. Here's what she wrote.

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"I stopped eating meat when I was 13. I told my mom and dad that my decision was based on animal welfare and the high carbon footprint of meat. But the truth is that while I theoretically cared about animals and the planet, mostly I just wanted to be different. I lived in a small Southern town where it was more common to see the image of Jesus in a piece of toast than encounter a real live vegetarian. So while my motives weren't entirely pure, giving up meat certainly made me different. Population of Cullowhee, NC: 9,427 meat eaters and 1 vegetarian.

For the next 17 years, I ate grains, produce, legumes and fake meat products like those Morningstar bacon strips that have a lower nutritional value than cat food. And for the next 17 years, it seemed like I was always hungry no matter how large my bowl of beans and rice. Even worse than constant hunger, I didn't seem to enjoy food the way other people did. Eating was a chore, like folding laundry or paying bills, but even more annoying because if I didn't do it I would die. I was sick of being hungry, I was sick of beans and rice, and so at the age of 31, I have made a decision: I will try and become a meat eater."

Thanks to a new study by the Humane Research Council, we now know a lot more about the psychology of why so many vegetarians and vegans, like my daughter, give up their all-veggie ways.

The Methods

The [Humane Research Council](#), now known as Faunalytics, is a non-profit that uses market research techniques to assess public opinions related to animal issues. Their mission is to provide information animal protection organizations can use to more effectively spread their messages. And for this study, they recruited a group of top-flight social scientists to design a survey to examine differences between current and ex-vegetarians and vegans.

The study sample was unique for a couple of reasons. First, it was huge – 11,399 adults of all dietary stripes were recruited from a representative group of Americans maintained by Harris Interactive (part of the company that conducts the highly respected Harris Poll). Second, while not perfectly representative of the American public, it is a much closer representation of the population of the United States than other studies of our collective dietary choices. (While the sample was a bit older, wealthier, more educated, whiter and more female than the general public, I was more impressed by how diverse it was.)

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The Findings

For anyone interested in the psychology of meat-eating and meat avoidance, the data is a gold mine. Here is a quick

overview of some of the more interesting findings.

- **How many?** The proportion of true vegetarians and vegans in the United States is surprisingly small. Only about 2% of respondents did not consume any meat – 1.5% were vegetarians and 0.5% were vegans. These findings are generally consistent with [other studies](#).
- **Going back.** Five out of six people who give up meat eventually abandon their vegetarian ways.
- **Vegans vs. vegetarians.** Vegans are less likely to backslide than vegetarians. While 86% of vegetarians returned to meat, only 70% of vegans did.
- **Political views.** More than twice as many vegetarians and vegans indicated they were politically liberal rather than conservative.
- **Demographics.** Compared to current vegetarian/vegans, ex-vegetarians tended to be older, more conservative and more likely to be traditional Christians. There were no differences in the gender ratios, education or race/ethnicity of former and current vegetarians/vegans.
- **Gender differences.** As expected, there were higher proportions of women than men among both present and former meat avoiders. (Nearly every study has found that women are more concerned about animal issues. For a review, see [here](#).)

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- **Reasons for going veg.** Current vegetarians/vegans were considerably more likely than former meat avoiders to say they originally gave up eating meat for reasons of taste, concern for animals, feelings of disgust, social justice, or religious beliefs.
- **Health problems.** Only 29% of ex-vegetarians/vegans indicated that they experienced specific health-related symptoms while on a no-meat diet.
- **Back to veggies?** 37% of ex-vegetarian/vegans indicated that they would be interested in going back to a no-meat diet at some point in the future.
- **The purity problem.** 43% of ex-vegetarians/vegans said they found it too difficult to be “pure” with their diet.

The Implications: Meat Reduction Is More Effective Than Meat Elimination

The implications of this study are important. Only 2% of Americans do not eat any animal products. (This number has not changed appreciably for 20 years.) Further, the fact that five out of six vegetarians go back to eating meat suggests that an all-veggie diet is very hard for most people to maintain over the long haul. Hence, the authors of the report argue that animal protectionists would be better off concentrating their efforts to persuade “the many” to *reduce* their consumption of flesh rather than trying to convince “the few” to take the absolutist route and give up meat.

completely. Sounds right to me.

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Postscript. In reality, my daughter was not the *only* vegetarian in her hometown when she was a kid. And today she is still a reluctant omnivore. The truth is that she does not like meat very much – but we did eat a sausage and mushroom pizza for dinner last night.

References

The Humane Research Council, now known as Faunalytics, is one of my go-to sources for accurate information about animal issues. You can access their excellent white papers and subscribe to their research updates at their website [here](#).



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About the Author



Hal Herzog, Ph.D., is the author of *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard To Think Straight About Animals*.

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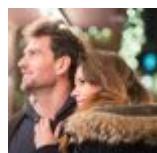
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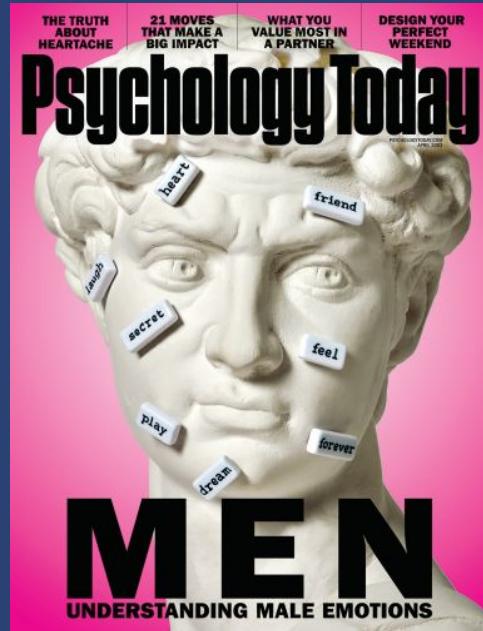
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